OF SKRIMSLS AND MEN

ICELANDIC WATER-BEINGS FROM FOLKLORE TO SPECULATIVE ZOOLOGY

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French folklorist Michel Meurger, author of *Lake Monster Traditions* and numerous articles on the cultural aspects of cryptozoological lore, turns the spotlight onto the Icellandic *skrimsl*, and suggests that there may be much more to be found here than a physical water monster.

SCHOLARS FOR THULE

From 1752 to 1757, Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, two students from Copenhagen University, toured Iceland. The two scholars were sent by the authorities to carry out a complete survey of the fauna and natural resources of this remote Danish territory.

Ólafsson, himself an Icelander, combined the accuracy of a scientist with the enthusiasm of a poet in his approach to his mother country. He completed the work based on their mutual research in 1767. *Travels in Iceland* appeared in Danish in 1772, was translated into French in 1802, and then into English in 1805. The book was reissued in Great Britain in 1975, but in a version that was extensively abridged. I will therefore have to translate quite frequently from the French edition [1].

Travels in Iceland is a priceless first-hand testimony on a country then severely tried by natural catastrophes. According to B.S. Benedikz:

> The climate of Iceland reached its very lowest point in the eighteenth century, and the social history of the period is a grim document. [2]

Ólafsson and Pálsson travelled through Iceland during the period of the Great Hunger of 1753-1759, when hundreds of farmers starved [3]. To make things worse, numerous volcanoes erupted, altering a landscape that had been made suitable to human needs. Lava-flows filled up lakes and cut off watercourses. As noted by Ólafsson, countrymen around the legendary Mount Hekla lived in "anguish and fear of a forthcoming eruption, more violent than ever" [4]. In the dales lying at the foot of the dreaded mountain, our travellers found the ground "dreadfully disrupted by underground fire", and lakes that had formerly been full of fish, like the Fiskevatn, deserted by fishermen [5]. Undoubtedly such a situation had a depressing influence on local mentalities, and it is hardly surprising to find a symbolic expression of the raging elements in the references to water monsters that creep over the pages of Ólafsson's book.

Of course, such creatures are not a direct product of this disastrous period. Icelandic water monsters originate from older times, yet one can argue that the distress caused by harsher conditions of living may have radicalised their representations, and made their presence more tangible for Icelanders of the 18th century. Yet this relationship between misery and creativity is not at all apparent in *Travels in Iceland*. On the contrary, Ólafsson treats narratives about monsters as naturalistic reports, devoid of any commitment to group symbolic or collective fears.

At the time of the scholars' survey, countrymen had a different way of looking at the natural world to that of representatives of learned culture. At a popular level, sightings of strange creatures were considered as portents and, therefore, closely related to the fate of a specific community. Modern natural sciences, with their emphasis on an outside world segregated from man's expectations and fears, have severed the thread tying "homo divinans" with the products of his own creativity. During the Age of Enlightenment, folk-beliefs about fabulous creatures were systematically scrutinised by literal-minded scientists. Some forms were

rejected, others were tentatively introduced into scientific treatises, at the price of losing their more obvious supernatural associations. Thus, a naturalist contemporary with Ólafsson, the bishop Erik Pontoppidan, in his *Forsög paa Norges Naturlige Historie* (Copenhagen, 1752-1753), tried to change the merman of Norwegian folklore into a conjectural being, a sea-man or sea-ape, by pruning out the incredible features [6]. Pontoppidan's reductive approach exemplified a central strategy of the Enlightenment: to rationalise and colonise popular beliefs. Ólafsson and Pálsson, members of a university and representatives of the Danish cultural elite, were agents in this general enterprise of disenchanting the world. Their way of classifying or rejecting folk-monsters put value on points which countrymen regarded as irrelevant, such as the relationship between a living creature and the natural surroundings, or the propinquity of a described form with already-classified animals. On the other hand, at a popular level points that were insignificant to zoologists, such as differences in size, played a major part in folk definitions of monsters. The naturalising of the rustic bestiary may thus be deciphered as an ideological struggle, part of a greater confrontation between learned and popular cultures.

AQUATIC HORSES AND MERMEN

Ólafsson's method of secularising is aptly illustrated by his treatment of the legendary 'nykur' or water-sprite; the horse was the favourite visible form for the entity. The author of *Travels in Iceland* gives 'nykur' a place between 'hog' and 'dog', under the heading "aquatic horse":

> The Icelanders rank amongst the quadrupeds of this country an aquatic horse, which they call 'nykur', because, as they say, it resides in the deepest of their freshwater lakes. However ridiculous this fable may appear, our travellers have thought proper to mention it, because the inhabitants cite a number of examples, and insist, in the strongest manner, on its existence, while the people of Norway are equally credulous with respect to this imaginary animal. They describe it in the following manner: they say, that it is all over a light grey colour, and nearly similar to the common horse; they add, that some persons have mounted these water-horses, and that others have used them for a great part of the day in their agricultural labours. They likewise assert that the aquatic horse couples with the common mare, and that thence have proceeded certain horses in Iceland of so ticklish or delicate a disposition, that on making them enter the water up to their bellies, they rear and throw the rider, as well as any burden they may bear." [7]

One wonders if Icelanders of the 18th century really ranked the nykur "amongst the quadrupeds". This way of classing the water-horse among representatives of a familiar fauna seems to stem more from the scholar's own reworking of information than from the countrymen's original beliefs. Yet other details do correspond closely with Icelandic traditions: the nykur as riding and draft horses, or mingling with mares like a common stallion.

Similar motifs are found in legends from Sweden and Norway, the mother-country of the Icelanders, and also in Scotland and in islands with early Norse colonists such as Shetland. Regarding this "aquatic horse", Ólafsson is torn between the commonsensical impetus to ridicule it and his own empiricism, which tells him that such a firm belief must be well-grounded. Following the same line of argument, Bishop Pontoppidan gave credence to merman stories when he discovered that in the diocese of Bergen "several hundred persons of credit and reputation" affirmed "that they have seen this kind of creature" [8].

Ólafsson takes a middle course between local definitions of the nykur and the requirements of taxonomy: "We may therefore presume that the 'nykur' of the Icelanders is merely a serpent, or some other marine animal of a prodigious size, which may have been observed in the lakes and rivers" [9].

The restrictiveness conveyed by the

adverb 'merely' allowed an enlightened mind to admit that a serpent-nykur falls within the bounds of possibility. In fact, defining 'nykur' as an unknown animal had given it wholeness and morphological stability, both qualities lacking in the original creature from folklore.

Initially, 'nykur' was neither encompassed by a single definition nor by a unique shape. Rather, as Dag Strombäck has shown, the power of shape-shifting seems to have been a primary feature of the entity, as incorporated into learned treatises [10]. Scholarly reluctance to despise evidence of the senses played a major part in this rehabilitation of legend. Like cryptozoologists, their modern inheritors, Enlightenment scientists were extreme phenomenologists, believing they could set apart ideological components of a narrative, disparaged as 'superstitions', from the objective core. They grossly underestimated the guiding role of culture in the interpretation of perception.

Under the patronage of the goddess Nature, fish-tailed humans resurfaced in the works of Scandinavian erudites. In 1723, a Danish royal commission acknowledged the existence of mermen [11]. Pontoppidan, a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Copenhagen, had given favourable mention to stories about the capture of mermen's offspring by Norwegian fishermen. Next, Ólafsson reproduces the full report of Curate Gudmundsson, concerning the alleged discovery of one of those 'marmenills' or child-like creatures with a fish-tail. This being was discovered in the belly of a shark, remained on the shore for about a week, and was finally thrown away in the sea. Ólafsson is plainly impressed by such legally-deposed testimony, and by the offer of the priest to "procure certificates from all the persons who have seen it". This testimonial-judicial approach to folklore helped 'soft' data to secure a semblance of concreteness [12]. In this case, the Danish scholar wavers between scepticism and the will to believe on his own terms. Ólafsson states the pros and cons. Indeed, the lower part of the creature had been entirely eaten, and this may be a man after all. Yet the author of *Travels in Iceland* knows that people living on the coast of this island piously bury corpses found in "whales and other large things".

> And hence, those who saw the animal in question would have made much hesitation in leaving it on the shore for a week, and afterwards throwing it into the sea, unless they had been convinced it was not the corpse of a human being. [13]

Ólafsson is thus ready to leave a side door open for the 'marmenill' in the temple of science.

STRANGE CREATURES FROM LAKES AND RIVERS

'Nykur' and 'marmenill' are not the only inhabitants of the enchanted world summoned by Eggert Ólafsson, and taking a conjectural life under his feather quill. Our Danish naturalist, striving to be exhaustive, devotes a lengthy passage of his work to the "lakes, waterfalls and rivers reputed to contain curious things".

Among such mysterious waters, Ólafsson classed the lakes believed to shelter aquatic horses [14]. Then there was the pond formed by Galtaboek waterfall, near Mount Hekla. People living in the neighbourhood claimed to have seen curious shapes in the whirling water. Pálsson and Ólafsson's own guide testified that, in his youth, "he had seen here two apparitions, one like a *skate*, and the other like a *halibut*". Yet, as the travelers had seen nothing in the same place, "they cannot decide the matter" [15].

Here, the strangeness rests less in the form of common fishes, than in their localisation: both skate and halibut belong in salt water, and here they are observed in a freshwater pond. In *Lo!*, Charles Fort collected cases of the appearance of sea creatures in freshwater lakes and ponds [16]. Even so, the guide's narrative may have included a symbolic meaning, lost in Ólafsson's rendering, where the encounter is reduced to the report of an ichthyological oddity.

We come closer to the popular world-view in the next example. At Lake

Thingvallavatn, fishermen had allegedly seen, on rare occasions, "creatures of monstrous girth". Freakish size plays a major part in the definition of popular monsters: in tales and legends, gigantism expresses an estrangement from the norm. In this case, our naturalist had obvious difficulties in reconciling such narratives about gargantuan fishes with a well-ordered natural world. He concluded that the things from Thingvallavatn were not real animals, but 'visions' produced by 'vapours' rising from the depths "like a whale's spout" **[17]**. Ólafsson will elaborate this theory later. For the moment, he tells us that "the Hvitaa river has always been known for its monsters".

In 1595, on a Sunday, parishioners returning from Skalholt church and taking the ferry, saw "a monstrous creature, as high as a house", emerging from the water, then rushing to plunge into the river downstream. The beast had a head like a *sea-hound* (seal), and tall spikes protruded from its back. In the summer of 1636, a 'great serpent' was often observed in the Hvitaa river, and people called it 'okind', that is, 'monster or unknown animal'. Lastly, informants reported in 1702 that they had seen in the same waterway a rounded back, like that of a huge sea-hound **[18]**.

Groevatn Lake, near Krisavik, took its name from the green colour of the water. Bizarre forms surfaced for a short while and dived again. A witness told Ólafsson and Pálsson that he had had a glimpse of a 'little monster' like a 'porpoise', but the wonder vanished soon afterwards **[19]**.

All the witnesses attested that extraordinary animals rose from the depths of Lake Kleyfarvatn, and that they were bigger and stayed longer on the surface than in Groevatn. One informant told Ólafsson that here, in 1755, he saw a vast bulk breaking surface. In shape it was akin to a skate, but of "a prodigious size". Kleyfarvatn abounded with fish, yet no fisherman would run the risk of coming to close, because this lake was the abode of a fearful serpent. The monster was black, and looked like a common eel. Their guide assured Ólafsson and Pálsson that he had often observed and studied the creature, because the serpent stayed at times for "nearly two minutes" at the surface. In 1749, on a beautiful day in August, people occupied in haymaking saw the Kleyfarvatn serpent. The creature crawled onto a headland. Witnesses were afterwards unable to explain how the monster came ashore, and how it managed to return to the lake. They only said that it "grew, raised itself, moved forward imperceptibly, vanished, or was already gone when one gazed at the place where the creature stood" **[20]**.

Ólafsson wanted to compare this weird testimony with reports gathered on the banks of the Lagarfljot. The Lagarfljot, according to Ebenezer Henderson in 1819, "had more appearance of a lake than a river" **[21]**. It is running water nevertheless, even if modern monster-hunters describe it as a lake **[22]**.

According to the author of *Travels in Iceland*:

> Lagarfljot river is famous for the monsters and huge serpents allegedly seen in it at all times; we regarded this tradition as a fable and an illusion for a long time. But we took some care to check our public records, and one can read in such annals that [...] since 1600 similar apparitions had been more frequently reported than in the past **[23]**.

In 1607, people saw in the river "the serpent coiled in three rings, and each stood so high that a man with a raised spear would have been able to pass underneath". This monster was observed again in 1612, 1618, 1641 and 1672. Yet after 1749, the apparitions of the Lagarfljot changed completely. In that year, people from the surrounding area, as well as travellers, clergymen and scholars, sighted extraordinary monsters at long range. One was formed like a great sea-hound. Witnesses compared its colour to the whitish hue of a skate. The huge creature played in the river, producing stormy waves. A second gigantic monster came to the surface, with a pointed hump on its back. Then a third creature, bigger still, churned the water. This had three humps on its back. Next, a 'pyramid' appeared in the Lagarfljot; informants noticed "jets of water" just like

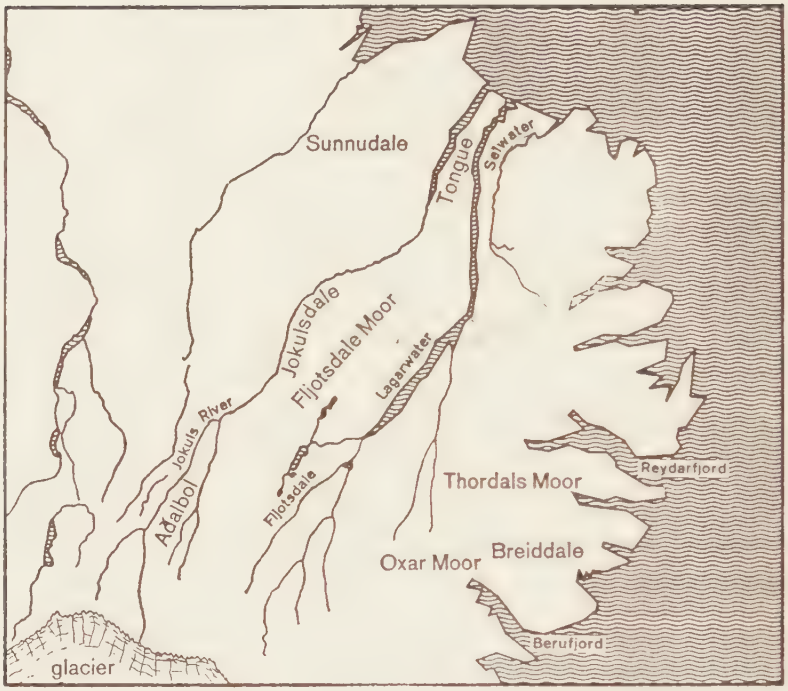

Fig. 1 - Map of eastern Iceland, showing the location of the Lagarfljot (Lagarwater).

the ones produced when whales are "blowing", but "stronger".

1750 remained in the annals as the year of the Lagarfljot's monsters. Witnesses observed an object described at one time as a "hull of a boat" and at other times as a "ship with six oarsmen" moving quickly up and down stream. A huge horse, jet black, with a big mane, appeared in the river. Then a creature with a double pig-snout. Then, two shapes emerged from the Lagarfljot, things so bulky that the annals compared them to great houses; they climbed up the banks and stayed on shore for some time. Ólafsson adds that he could have brought forward more reports **[24]**. Instead, our scholar preferred to try to interpret the documents. What was one to do with such "repeated accounts"?

According to Ólafsson:

> It is impossible to call such accounts into question, or to pretend that so many trustworthy witnesses would have invented them at different times. Similarly, to interpret the same accounts as illusions, liable to impress so many unprepared persons, is also impossible. Have we then to admit, with so many eyewitnesses, that such monsters are living unknown animals? Icelanders consider these apparitions as ominous, or as portents of something fatal in nature. If we compare these accounts with reports about prodigious sea-monsters such as the great sea-serpent seen near the Norwegian coast **[25]**, they appear more convincing. Yet there remains an objection. If the bulk of Lagarfljot's monsters has not been overestimated, then they will not find a place in this river. Imagination can easily conceive huge monsters in the ocean, where there is room enough, and one can give them a length of several hundred yards. But the Lagarfljot will not accomodate a monster of even a hundred feet. It is true that the Lagarfljot is the most prominent river in Iceland, due to its depth, 50 yards in some places, and to its width, 960 yards at its widest point. Yet generally, this river is only some yards deep, and its normal width, from 60 to 100 yards, being four or six yards in other places, where one can cross it without dismounting or inducing one's horse to swim across. Therefore,

we cannot admit that monsters so huge may row up, swim down, or move into this river, and it is still more unbelievable that they could enter the little rivers upstream; would it be possible for them to stay hidden for a score of years? How is it possible to explain that Icelanders angling from their boats on the Lagarfljot have never remarked the movements of these monsters? This river has not an amount of water sufficient to allow the body of such a creature to float towards the sea. Then why has nobody ever found the corpse of one of the monsters on shore, on sandbanks or in deep waters? We conclude then that the Lagarfljot is similar in this regard to other great rivers and lakes of Iceland and other countries as well, where the same phenomena have been observed: houses, animals and men floating at the surface. In such places, some peculiar effluvia from the bottom condense and congregate into thick clouds. Then, ruffled by the wind, clouds take various shapes, until they dissolve, spread and vanish. If we follow this hypothesis, Lagarfljot's phenomena find a natural explanation, and we still respect the witnesses's accounts. **[26]**

AN ENCHANTED BESTIARY

Pálsson and Ólafsson gathered a rich collection of reports of freshwater monsters. Their list includes mammals (sea-hound, water-horse, porpoise), reptiles (lake and river serpents) and fishes (skate, halibut, eel). According to Konrad Maurer, Stéfan Ólafsson (1620-1688), the Icelandic scholar and one of the publishers of the *Edda* in 1655, had already alluded to the "ghostly sea-hound of the Lagarfljot" in one of his songs **[27]**. Stéfan Ólafsson also mentioned the "skate of supernatural origin" haunting this watercourse **[28]**.

Regarding lake and river serpents, an Icelandic tradition grew up around a tiny invertebrate, the black slug (*Limax ater*), locally known as the *brekkusnigill*. The author of *Travels in Iceland* refers to the belief, held by "credulous people", that if you put the slug on a hoard of gold, the *brekkusnigill* will grow **[29]**. Like the legendary guardian-dragon, the slug becomes bigger and bigger, until it has to find more suitable surroundings. This mutation (akin to the transformation of a common land-snake into a monstrous *lindorm* and, finally, into a sea-serpent, according to Norwegian lore **[30]**), produced a "giant worm", and this colossal invertebrate sank to the bottom of large lakes and rivers, such as the Lagarfljot. The worm hidden in this river sometimes showed its enormous coils at the surface, and this apparition was considered as a portent of a forthcoming period of hunger **[31]**. Dealing with the question of Icelandic water-monsters, Maurer wrote that the local term *skrimsl* encompasses a wide variety of denizens of the sea, lakes and rivers, some of them wholly fabulous, others real but endowed with supernatural attributes, or redolent with sinister reputations.

This word was later misinterpreted by the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, author of *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas* (1868). During 1860, while touring Iceland, Baring-Gould met two tourists who had spent a week fishing at Lake Skoraldsvatn. They told him

Fig. 2 - The drawing of the skrimsl reproduced by Sabine Baring-Gould in his book, *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas* (1868) [Fortean Picture Library]

about a panic caused by "a skrimsl, a half fabulous monster, which is said to inhabit some of the Icelandic lakes, but which has generally been considered the offspring of the imagination". In his book, Baring-Gould reproduced a sketch made by an eyewitness, a farmer. The creature has a "large head, like that of a seal" and humps on the back [32].

The author of *Iceland*, a member of the Norse Literary Society, made a valuable search for old records about local water-monsters, including one of the first mentions of the Lagarfljot's strange phenomena: the apparition of a series of humps in 1345 [33]. Yet Baring-Gould is also responsible for a false interpretation of the term 'skrimsl'. For him, it was simply the name of an individual unknown creature, *a* skrimsl. Monster-enthusiasts gladly followed his trail. Constance Whyte saw in the skrimsl "an animal similar to the Loch Ness monster" [34]; Peter Costello, while enthusing about the farmer's sketch ("this naïve drawing is a splendid piece of evidence") regrets nevertheless that "the neck seems too short" [35]. Unfortunately, Icelanders in 1860 were not acquainted with Heuvelmansian long-necked seals...

In fact, 'skrimsl' is not the vernacular designation of some mammalian cryptobeast, but a common name for 'monster'. Indeed, William Craigie in 1896 uses the term *sjóskrimsl* in the general sense of 'sea-monster' [36]. Konrad Maurer is more explicit. A skrimsl is a monster, but also "one uses from time to time the word 'skrimsl' to refer to some individual animals, real or fabulous". For example, the narwhal and the *raud kembring* (or 'red comb'), a semi-mythical whale [37].

According to Ólafsson, Icelandic fishermen call the narwhal and the 'red comb' *illhvele*, 'bad whales'. They fear them, describing awful encounters between fishing-boats and such sea-monsters, when bad whales crush whole ships in their jaws and swallow the crew. They return during the following year to the place where they have sunk the boats, in the hope of finding new human prey [38]. Uno von Troil, chaplain to the Swedish king, mentions 'bad whales' in his *Letters from Island* (1780): unicorn whale and red comb are "forbidden as food by some ancient regulations, and particularly by the church laws. The Icelanders believe that the first sort are very fond of human flesh, and therefore avoid fishing in such places where they are." Fishermen are "afraid to mention even their names, and carry dung, brimstone, juniper-wood and some other articles of the same nature in their boats, in order to terrify them and prevent their too-near approach" [39].

Maurer writes that sea-monsters know their own names, and if you name them at sea, they come. Icelanders call this act of breaking a verbal taboo *sjóviti* [40].

Sjóskrimsl is therefore a protective generalisation, a 'sammelbegriff' or conceptual aggregate, uniting creatures distinct at the level of modern zoology, but here entangled in a numinous wholeness.

Beyond unicorn-whales and 'red combs', Maurer also classified as skrimsl the *selamódir* or 'mother of the seals', a mythical sea-hound of monstrous proportions, watching over the safety of seal-herds and swallowing the unwary. In this category also belongs the giant *skötumodir* or 'mother of the skates' [41].

This concept is a variant of the European theme of the 'master of the wild animals', a supernatural guardian of certain species. For example, in Voigtland, Germans believed in a 'mother of fishes' in the River Elster: "Each time that the monster shows itself, a man has been drowned, [there is] a fire, plague, the cost of living goes up and wars break out in the country" [42].

According to Maurer, a 'mother of the skates' had been seen in the Hvitaa river, of monstrous fame [43]. Colossal sea-hounds of the Lagarfljot and skates in Lake Kleyfarvatn may correspond to such guardian spirits in animal form.

We have not exhausted the whole range of shapes interpreted as 'skrimsls'. It may be a 'shark' swimming in Pjorsa river, or an 'upturned boat' sinking ships in the Porskafjör [44]. 'Skrimsls' may appear both in fresh and salt waters. Inhabitants of Grimsey, an island north of Iceland,

believed that the skrimsl often came on shore during the night. A local clergyman, Gudmund Jonsson, made an inquiry, and people showed him hollows in the sand where the monster had allegedly stood. According to Jonsson, the 'skrimsl' was perhaps some sort of whale, but cetacea are not prone to forays on dry land, and his research came to nothing [45]. The priest had tried to cut through the amorphous mass of skrimslian lore, to speculatively build a separate animal, to no avail. The reductive approach explodes the amorphousness of the entity, without offering empirical proof.

Cryptozoologists may translate the skrimsl as a primitive whale, or a long-necked seal. They will always forget some aspect: the skate-like or shark-like features are as important as the pinnipedian head. 'Skrimsl' is a bundle of loosely-knit definitions that avoid disentanglement. The assumed concreteness of this Lernaean Hydra is an illusory one. Readers of Baring-Gould know that a certain Dr Hjaltalin from Reykjavik became a believer in the monster, after having been shown a mass of bones washed up on the beach of the Lagarfljot: "These bones, he said, were very different from those of the whale, and he was unable to identify them with the bones of any marine animal frequenting the Northern seas" [46].

Indeed, during his stay in Iceland, Maurer heard about monstrous bones found somewhere. He met Dr Jón Hjaltalin, and the physician gave him the precise location of the skeleton. Bones had been found on the bank of the Hvitaa river, and people took them for the remains of the legendary worm. Maurer met a peasant who told him that since the worm had still been seen in the Hvitaa in 1857, like an "upturned boat", the bones were too old to belong to it. The German scholar and his travelling companion discovered the remains and, after a careful study, concluded that they were the bones of a fossil dolphin [47]. Thus, to give concreteness to the skrimsl's legend, Icelanders used fossils of 'Antediluvian' creatures. Austrian mountaineers used the same ideological tools when they collected *Ursus spelaeus* bones as dragon remains. Palaeontological finds, misinterpreted, helped imaginary animals gain an illusory facticity. Like a surrealistic collage, the 'skrimsl' is a composite something, formed with bits and pieces of real and unreal sea-creatures, pasted together by the creativity of fear. Seals played an important part in this portrait. I have shown that in the folklore of the seal-hunting culture of the Norwegian west coast, fabulous animals such as the *havhest* (sea-horse) integrated pinnipedian elements [48].

Icelanders were also seal-hunters and, according to Eggert Ólafsson, they considered sea-hounds with a mix of "dislike and reverence". For them, seals were so fond of human flesh that they followed boats to feed on the corpses of the drowned. The Danish scholar tried to understand this superstition in rationalistic terms, by conjuring up the awesome spectacle of two bulls fighting to the death in a pandemonium of barking sounds.

Such male seals, with their sharp fangs, may be extremely dangerous to an isolated man [49]. But throughout Scandinavia sea-hounds were also, at a popular level, associated with mermen and folk-magic [50]. Another Danish scholar, Knud Leems, in his *Account of the Lapplanders of Finmark* (1767), had published extracts from the confessions of Nordic witches. Some of them admitted to having, taken the likeness of whales to drive the fish away. One even confessed that "she had approached [a boat] in the shape of a *sea-dog*, and overset it" [51]. In 1649, a witch was burnt at Scalloway (Shetland) for having, in the shape of a porpoise, upset a four-oared boat and drowned its crew [52].

Also, various Icelandic water-monsters correspond to Norwegian counterparts. For example, the Skoraldalsvatn monster has a seal's head; so does the monster of Mostvatnet, a lake in Rogaland. 'Spikes' were observed on the back of sea-hound from 1595, in the Hvitaa river; the creature in Ormsjøen near Bergen is adorned with similar protuberances. More generally, one finds in Norwegian folklore descriptions of curious geometrical forms, which are also

described in Iceland: elongated shapes like 'capsized boats', humps and 'folds' [53].

By including ghostly skates, seals and serpents in a new interpretive frame of speculative zoology, Eggert Ólafsson severed their original links with popular divination, animism and magic. In *Travels in Iceland*, animal spooks are henceforth listed as conjectural creatures, ready to be picked up by adventurous naturalists. During the following century this phenomenon of cultural trivialising increased, spurred by the coming of the first tourists. Baring-Gould is a good example of this new generation of travellers, Victorian sportsmen and erudites, thirsty for 'survivals'.

In this process of gradual rationalising, local guides doubtless played a central part. Ólafsson used them as informants, and they entertained him with vivid accounts of their 'experiences' with water monsters.

One can interpret such guides as a kind of 'mediator' between their communities and the outside world. They translated folk-beliefs into simpler, more graspable variants; they were in turn influenced by the rationalistic explanations of scholarly travellers. In this exchange, magic skates became deglamourised, mere giant specimens of a known species, and water-horses assumed a spurious plausibility. In our century, sherpas and mountaineers, on the same model, together created the abominable snowman.

VAPOURS FROM HIDDEN CHASMS

If cryptozoologists may claim Ólafsson as one of their own, sceptics also have some reason to view him as one of their forefathers. For the author of *Travels in Iceland*, apparitions in the Lagarfljot were not in the same class as observations made in some of the lakes. The Danish scholar welcomed the water-horse and the merman to the realm of speculative natural sciences. Yet, for him, the Lagarfljot and Hvitaa phenomena belonged rather more to the category of 'visions'. According to Ólafsson, such phantoms were produced by vapours emerging from the depths and taking fantastic shapes. It was not an original theory. The concept of specific places of hauntings had links, for certain learned minds, with humoral pathology, and with the dampness of various surroundings, favourable to the emission of fogs. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton, discussing the topic of visions, writes that "the thickness of the air" may cause such effects. Also, fire-drakes, meteors and will-o'-the-wisps appear frequently in places like "moist valleys" [54].

Some shapes allegedly seen in the Lagarfljot indeed seem to belong more to the visionary world than to the zoological field, such as the bizarre pig with a double snout. In Scandinavian annals, lake serpents were sometimes observed in connection with ghostly phenomena. According to the *Hamar Chronicle* (1540), at the time of the apparition of a "terribly large serpent" in Lake Mjøsa, in Norway, a "monstrously big horned ox" was seen in the same place, going "as if it walked on the water" [55]. Here, the ox is clearly a prodigy of the same class as visions seen in the sky [56]. Yet this animal glides on the lake surface, and the serpent may also belong the realm of optical phenomena.

Modern rationalists will hardly repress a smirk when confronted by Ólafsson's visionary theory. Yet they will gladly endorse Lehn and Schroeder's reconstruction, viewing the Scandinavian merman as an "optical phenomenon" [57]. Both meteorology and cryptozoology offer only reductive phenomenological answers to a cultural question. To understand the complex set of definitions enclosed by the word 'skrimsl', we do not have to sound Icelandic lakes, but to consult local folklore. Still, Ólafsson's objections to the reality of the Lagarfljot's creatures are crucial to an understanding of the difficulties raised by the naturalising of fabulous creatures.

The author of *Travels in Iceland* regretted the lack of anomalous bones. This problem would be hotly debated between believers and sceptics in the case of the Loch Ness monster. More acutely, the Danish scholar realised the incongruity of the presence of

colossal beings in unsuitable surroundings. This last argument will not impress cryptozoologists, accustomed as they are to allow that exaggeration distorts reports of monsters. But Icelandic informants insisted on the oversized aspect of the objects they perceived. Furthermore, what can a naturalist make of the 'pyramid' seen in 1749 in the Lagarfljot? This is too angular a shape to reconcile with the backbone of a vertebrate. The various 'humps' mentioned since 1345 in the same river imply also - as in Loch Ness - an unusual pliability of the body of the putative monster. Theorists from the "giant invertebrate" school at Loch Ness will cling to the popular identification of the thing in the Lagarfljot as a "giant worm". They will also exploit the report about the "serpent of the Kleyfarvatn": "It grew, raised itself forward imperceptibly, vanished, or was already gone when one gazed at the place where the creature stood". Bold theorists of the "great orm" will try to interpret this passage as an attempt to describe a worm-like progression. Yet, one may use the same extract in quite a different way, to wring from it the account of a hallucinatory experience; and the spectacle of a giant invertebrate crawling on land is both ludicrous and scientifically unconvincing.

From Eggert Ólafsson to modern monster hunters, searchers have made the same error: to take literally, as objective observations, narratives loaded with social meaning and nature symbolism. At the end of our quest for Northern wonders, monsters melt like ice in the green waters of some distant Icelandic lake...

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